

Theory and Practice as Viewed from the Classroom

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Most of the teachers in my high school think philosophy of education is both useless and boring. They regret having been forced to waste time studying it and ask me: "How could a guy like you possibly have earned a Ph.D. in philosophy of education and have been a professor of that subject for eight years?"¹ They like me and talk freely about all sorts of personal matters, yet they rarely bring up anything remotely connected with philosophy of education. The subject is mentioned in a tone of humor and mutual embarrassment, as one might mention a rip in the seat of the pants. The chairman of our department, the principal, and the superintendent of our school system all enthusiastically supported my candidacy to be a teacher of mathematics and recommended that I be paid in accordance with my doctorate and my eight years of professorial teaching experience. Yet no teacher or administrator has ever initiated a "consultation" with me for philosophical or theoretical advice on a practical matter, and the response to my occasional initiatives has been polite but reserved.

At the time I was interviewing for a job, my doctoral specialty in philosophy of

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education and my experience as a college teacher were often perceived as negative factors. Many school systems refused to consider my candidacy because I would be too high on the salary scale. What seems more significant is that department heads and principals who had barely met me constantly questioned whether I would be able to "reach" high school students (i.e., come down out of the ivory tower to their level), and whether I could handle discipline problems. Throughout my first two years of teaching, students who were not doing well (and their parents) often defended or rationalized poor performance by referring to my background and questioning my ability to "reach" the average sixteen year old. It seems obvious that teachers, administrators, and parents regard philosophy as abstruse and impractical, and they believe that professors are pedantic obfuscators who deal only with abstractions and are unable to communicate clearly or interestingly. Professors of philosophy of education are presumed to have theoretical knowledge concerning the "discipline problem," but secondary school teachers and administrators are not aware or will not believe that such knowledge could actually be useful in the classroom situation.

In view of the way my expertise in philosophy of education is regarded by practicing teachers and administrators, I decided it would be important to reconsider the general issue of whether philosophy of education is or can be useful for the classroom teacher, and how collegiate teaching of the subject might be made more interesting and more relevant. I and others have ex-

amined such questions at length on previous occasions, but always from a scholarly, theoretical perspective.² In this article I shall examine the practical aspects of the relevance between theory and practice, as exemplified by the way other teachers and I use it.

Much has been written about the relevance of philosophic theory to educational practice, i.e., how a philosophical system or a method of doing philosophy can be used to defend or criticize policies and actions of teachers, administrators, and non-school nurturers such as parents, nurses, governments, and institutions. Some work has also been done on the relevance of educational practice to philosophic theory, i.e., how the experiences of a practitioner influence his or her philosophical commitments and methods. Almost all work on these topics, however, has been done from a theoretical or speculative standpoint. The problem of the relevance between philosophic theory and educational practice has been viewed as a problem in *logic* (How can general value statements be made to stand as premises in chains of syllogisms leading to practical prescriptions?); *linguistic analysis* (What does "relevance" mean? Can theories be value-neutral? Is "education" a triadic relation?); *metaphysics and epistemology* (To be internally consistent and comprehensive, a given philosophic system must support some conclusions while opposing others on the question, "Given human nature and what I believe in, how should I go about deciding, formulating, or defending prescriptions for action?"); *history* (How have various philosophers viewed the

theory-practice connections?³); or *psychology and sociology* (What motivates a person to change either value commitments or actions until they are brought into correspondence?).⁴

What I have said about philosophy of education is also true about history of education, sociology of education, psychology of education, and educational administration. The topics and categories differ from one discipline to another, of course, but much has been written about the relevance of foundational theory to educational practice. Little has been written about the impact a practitioner's experiences have upon his or her commitments and techniques in the theoretical discipline. Virtually all of these writings are theoretical or speculative.

An important question has been overlooked: How do teachers and administrators view the theory-practice relationship in the context of their day-to-day practicing? When a practical problem arises, does it come to mind that the problem may have interesting or important theoretical aspects? Is the practitioner motivated to ponder theoretical problems or consult his foundational knowledge? If so, has he been given sufficient foundational knowledge and sufficient practice in applying it to enable him to do the pondering, consulting, and applying satisfactorily in some particular case? How do practitioners feel about the usefulness of courses they took in philosophy of education? Does studying philosophy of education affect a practitioner's conduct even though **that** person is unaware of it?

Why has the theory of the theory-

practice relation been extensively studied while the practice of the theory-practice relation has been virtually ignored? It is not the purpose of this article to address that question, but I cannot resist the opportunity to offer a speculative hypothesis. Perhaps **the** theoretical side has been predominant because it is theoreticians who teach courses which practitioners are forced to take. Since professors and administrators usually decide the curriculum and the standards of intellectual respectability while practitioners are in the role of students seeking credits and grades, whatever content is favored by the professors and administrators will be predominant. The professors enjoy producing theory, and in particular they enjoy (and feel some need for) generating theories about why the study of theory helps the practitioner.

Perhaps Marx would say that the theory of the theory-practice relationship is the rationalization of the bourgeoisie intellectual class (professors) whereby they seek to prove to themselves and the working class (practitioners) that intellectuals are indispensable. Recent economic conditions have forced both practitioners and theoreticians to reassess the worth of theory in every dimension of human endeavor, including education. Cut-backs in the foundational component of teacher education in favor of more field-centered, performance-based, practical training are analogous to cut-backs in general education, the arts, and humanities in favor of more practical, vocational subjects. There has been some consciousness-raising in the field of education as teachers through their unions are demanding more of a

voice in the standards for certification and the content of teacher-education courses. It has now become commonplace for groups of teachers to organize courses, specify curriculum, and hire professors to teach what is wanted through in-service workshops, teacher-centers, and group-independent studies, for example. Perhaps it is time for professors of teacher education to take account of the practical aspects of the theory-practice relationship, even if only to protect their job security in the face of a proletarian revolt!

There are two general approaches to studying the practical aspects of the theory-practice relation. One approach would be to perform statistical analyses of data from questionnaires and observations. For example, the responses of a random sample of teachers who had studied philosophy of education could be compared with a random sample of those who had not with regard to how well they perform certain teaching or administrative duties, or how they answer a series of attitudinal or cognitive questions. A second approach would be to make an introspective appraisal or compile an anecdotal report. The first approach has the advantage of seeming to be scientific, objective, and mathematically impressive, while the second approach can be more intimate, soul-searching, and subjectively significant. I have decided to take the second approach. What follows is a report of my observations and conclusions about the practice of the theory-practice connection based upon the experiences of a well-established theoretician (myself) who has been teaching in a typical suburban high school since September 1975.

I believe there are three settings in which it would be reasonable to expect foundations of education to be obviously applicable to educational practice. First, any conscientious teacher who has studied foundations of education could be expected to have classroom experiences which would at least occasionally provoke serious theoretical questioning, analysis, and criticism or justification of one's own performance. Second, teachers often discuss common problems informally with other teachers at lunch, over coffee, in the workroom or teachers' lounge, etc. One would expect that such conversations might be enhanced by or lead to theoretical analysis. Third, there are times when the formal or official business of a school seems to require theoretical argumentation, such as the preparation of updated curriculum guides, the adoption of new policies regarding graduation requirements, or the once-every-ten-year reaccreditation evaluation. I shall now describe the actual uses made of foundational studies in education in each of these contexts in my own experience.

I am certainly a conscientious teacher and have studied philosophy of education at great depth. I have been surprised and sometimes embarrassed, however, at how seldom I raise theoretical questions about my own classroom practices. My first year as a high school teacher followed immediately after eight years as a professor of philosophy of education. Surely the relevance between theory and practice should have been obvious then, if only because my full time theorizing and full time practicing occurred so closely together. Yet, like all

first year teachers, I was spending seven hours per day at school, which drained me physically and emotionally, and an *additional* thirty or forty hours per week reading textbooks, trying out potential homework problems, preparing lesson plans, constructing tests and grading them, and keeping records on student attendance and performance. The workload of a conscientious first year teacher is truly enormous, leaving almost no free time on evenings or weekends and no inclination to use free time to examine theoretical issues. Of course it is true that raising an issue requires only a moment's insight, and time is not required until one analyzes the issue. Nevertheless, there were very few issues that I raised even fleetingly or tentatively.

During my second and third years of teaching I had increasing amounts of time and energy for my private pursuits. I had mastered the textbooks, could reuse old lesson plans and tests, and knew how to run my classroom smoothly and my record keeping efficiently. Still, I seldom raised a theoretical issue spontaneously. When I chastised myself for such scholarly lethargy and forced myself to theorize, I found that I was able to theorize as well as ever, but the connection or relevance to my daily work was tenuous at best and often seemed laughable. I felt it was more important to develop improved tests, new strategies for teaching difficult topics, and classroom games to break the monotony of the daily cycle: taking attendance, checking homework or quiz, going over homework, covering new material, and assigning new homework.

Here are some classroom events and some of the beginnings of theoretical analysis which they stimulated:

1. Should I show a certain instructional film at the expense of covering a certain textbook topic? Which knowledge is of most worth? Is variety of mode of presentation sufficiently important to compensate for the selection of less worthy material?
2. Am I justified in spending more time or energy with some students at the expense of others? Spend more time with bright students because they are our future leaders (Plato); spend more time with slow students because they need it (Marx: from each according to ability, to each according to need).
3. Should I make students stay after school when they repeatedly fail to do homework? Yes, because it is a school policy; yes, because I am responsible for knowing what is best for them and making them do it; no, because they should learn to take responsibility for their own learning.
4. When ordered to do so by my department head, should I tell the students a test we are standardizing for future use will count toward their grades (to motivate them) when in fact it will not count? No, because it would be wrong to lie, and also because if the students discover that I have lied for my own convenience, they may learn by example to lie for their own convenience; yes, because parents, teachers, administrators, and public officials have the right to deceive

their subordinates when necessary for their general welfare.

5. Should I join the teachers' union? (This question arose even before the first day of school, as the union's departmental representative and other teachers spoke with me about it. Arguments for and against teachers' unions and strikes are well known.)

In these and all other cases where I was stimulated to begin philosophical inquiry, the stimulus was some specific classroom incident or a pattern of specific practices. Abstract theorizing, beginning and ending with general speculation, would have seemed uninteresting and unproductive. While time and inclination did not permit philosophical speculation to rise very far above the mundane, my background in philosophy of education enabled me to recognize that these issues *could* lead to more significant speculation. Often I could recognize the general outlines of profound epistemological or metaphysical arguments, without actually delineating those arguments. The issues that most often provoked the beginnings of philosophical inquiry were problems in practical morality, usually of two types: (1) Given two or more desirable actions which are incompatible because of limited time or resources, what should be their order of priority? (2) Is a certain action morally right or wrong under a certain set of circumstances?

I have now shown that a conscientious teacher with a strong background in philosophy of education might not often have the time or inclination to pursue significant theoretical argu-

ments which would defend or criticize his own classroom practices. Perhaps for the same reasons, teachers usually do not rise very far above the mundane when discussing classroom problems with other teachers. Two mathematics teachers, relaxing in the teachers' lounge, might prefer to discuss the latest events in professional sports or politics. If they talk about their work, it is usually to commiserate jokingly but not to analyze or prescribe. Common examples of such conversation might be:

"John Doe said today that he couldn't remember how to use the Pythagorean Theorem. How did he ever get into Advanced Senior Math?"

"Heck, that's nothing. Sam Smith said today that he never even heard of the Pythagorean Theorem. He claims Mr. Jones never taught it last year."

"Well, considering that it was Mr. Jones, maybe the kid is telling the truth!"

"Ha, ha."

If teachers do discuss mutual problems seriously, it is almost always for the purpose of getting quick answers to practical problems or sharing information on how well some technique or procedure works. For example, Mr. Jones might complain that his students just cannot seem to learn how to use the Pythagorean Theorem, and Mr. Johnson may suggest emphasizing which side of the triangle is the hypotenuse, or always writing the square of the length of the hypotenuse alone on the left side of the equation. Serious discussion among teachers about shared problems is almost always limited to exchanging immediately practical information or offering advice

in which merits are not argued theoretically. Despite my strong background in philosophy of education and my continuing belief that philosophical reasoning about classroom problems is interesting and often essential if a teacher is to be intelligent and ethical about his work, I usually felt no distress about participating in such mundane conversation, felt little need for theoretical analysis at the time, and was frankly glad to receive whatever practical advice I could get, albeit unsubstantiated.

Teachers simply do not use theory when thinking about their own classroom problems or when talking with other teachers informally. But surely we would expect teachers and administrators to feel a need for theoretical guidance when formally debating the official business of the school. Unfortunately, my experience shows that this is not so.

At meetings of the mathematics department, we often discussed the need to include computer programming, basic computational skills, and metric awareness in our courses, but we never tried to justify or criticize the inclusion of these or other topics for any reasons other than the fact that parents, administrators, school committee members, or governmental policy required their inclusion. The mathematics department developed an elaborate curriculum guide describing each course's scope and content clearly so that a new teacher could teach a course correctly by following the guide, but the department did not consider whether new courses should be offered or old ones revised. The chairman proposed to acquire new textbooks for some important courses, but felt no need to

reconsider the purposes of the department or our overall approach to education before deciding what books to order.

The principal appointed a committee of well-respected teachers whose task was to "upgrade" and "tighten" the graduation requirements, but it was considered irrelevant to discuss the purpose of education or to describe what is meant by a "well-educated person" in any terms other than how many years of what subjects must be taken and how many credits must be earned each year for promotion. The overall question of whether promotion and graduation requirements should be increased was never debated by teachers or administrators, because the back-to-basics mood of the times made it seem obvious that such changes were needed. Eventually the school board voted against the proposals, primarily because requiring students to take more courses would require additional staffing or prevent the board from firing the number of teachers indicated by declining enrollments.

A modified "open campus" policy was in effect during my first year of teaching; students were allowed to go outdoors and even away from campus during periods when they were not taking classes. By my third year, sophomores were required to sit in study hall during all unscheduled periods, and, in my fourth year, juniors were also required to have study halls. Now, in my fifth year, everyone has study halls, although seniors have their study hall in the cafeteria and are allowed to talk with each other.

Neither the original decision to have an open campus nor the eventual

phased-in reintroduction of mandatory study halls was seriously debated. The campus had been opened in the first place only because the community had voted down a tax increase that would have funded an addition to the building, so there were too many students to fit into the classrooms. As student population declined in the late 1970s, it became possible once again to fit students into mandatory study halls. Philosophical discussion of freedom, authority, responsibility, or the purposes of education was never entertained. To the best of my knowledge, names like Holt, Illich, Kozol, Rousseau, and Silberman were never mentioned.

I am giving numerous examples showing how teachers and administrators in my high school operate at a mundane level, either unaware of or uncaring about the philosophical, historical, psychological, and sociological theories that would have a bearing on practical problems. My purpose in reciting this dreary litany is not to criticize my colleagues as ignorant, insensitive, or incompetent. On the contrary, I have very high regard for them. My colleagues are well-educated, concerned about their students' academic achievements and personal well-being, and constantly do extra work to improve their own competence and the school's programs. My colleagues and my school are generally thought to be among the best in the region, as demonstrated by superior student performance on standardized academic tests and by championship achievements in sports, music, and community service. It is precisely because of the high quality of my colleagues and the

school that I feel upset about the lack of impact of theory upon practice. If a good school operates at such a mundane level, imagine how an average or below-average school must operate! Virtually all teachers and administrators have taken one or more courses in philosophical, historical, social, or psychological foundations of education, but the courses obviously failed to make an impact on their educational practices.

Many professors of philosophy of education may not be aware that every accredited public high school (and every accredited private or public college) has a document entitled "Philosophy and Objectives" which is revised at least once every ten years and adopted officially by the faculty or governing board. If such documents are generated as a result of serious deliberation and careful procedures, they should be regarded as treasure troves for philosophers of education. Certainly courses in philosophy of education should examine some of these documents, not only because their contents deserve study, but also to provide obvious relevance between the college's theory course and what goes on in the high school classroom. Yet many professors of education seem unaware of these documents, and those who are aware of them regard such statements as unworthy of study. Likewise, the high school teachers who generate these statements are usually aware of their contents only at the time they are being generated.

During my third year as a high school teacher, I participated as a member of a large committee whose task was to develop the statement of

the school's philosophy of education for the decennial self-study and reaccreditation. The accreditation guidebook states that the philosophy should be developed first and then used by each department and self-study committee to criticize those practices that are at variance with the philosophy.⁵ The accreditation visiting committee is not allowed to criticize the school for what is espoused in the statement of philosophy, but can criticize only for failing to implement it. Thus, the administration and faculty initially felt that we should use the existing philosophy and modify it only as necessary to reflect actual current practices. The idea of developing a statement of ideal purposes and then revising the curriculum and administrative policies to fit the new philosophy seemed revolutionary and was not accepted. I did manage to collect about forty statements from schools in other communities and used them to identify topics for consideration. The newly formulated statement that resulted after several months of committee work and several hours of debate at faculty meetings is, I believe, clearer and slightly more idealistic than its predecessor. However, the debates over the statement were notable for lack of theoretical arguments. Almost all debating time was spent on technical problems of wording or sentence construction, with little time devoted to substantive disputes and almost no philosophical or historical argumentation. The statement itself, like the forty obtained from other communities, espoused goals such as helping each student to achieve his or her maximum potential, to be happy and productive,

and to accept democratic decisions without loss of individual integrity.

Like the forty statements obtained from other schools, however, our statement is distressingly general and noncontroversial. It contains no theory of the mind or of knowledge and no discussion of the characteristics of the good life or the good society. The meaning of "potential" and the merits of democracy were never seriously debated. Some schools conduct formal surveys of their communities to determine what goals the community deems most important, but my school never considered such a survey and did not have students or townspeople participate actively in formulating the statement. The self-study guidebook requires that a study be done of the demographic and economic characteristics of the town and what becomes of the students after graduation; however, our study of "school and community," which was available before the philosophy was adopted, was not used in developing the philosophy statement nor was it referred to when the faculty debated the statement.

Parenthetically, we might observe that professors of philosophy of education are usually at least as nontheoretical about their work as elementary and secondary teachers. In faculty lounges, departmental meetings, and even national conventions of the Philosophy of Education Society, professors often prefer to talk about sports, national politics, or faculty politics. When professors exchange views about philosophy of education, they are like mathematics teachers discussing various theorems or problem solving techniques: such discussions deal

with the contents of their fields of expertise, but are not theoretical discussions about educational practice.

Why should teachers at the elementary or secondary level be expected to use or at least be aware of philosophical arguments concerning what and how they teach when professors of philosophy of education do not use and may not be aware of philosophical arguments concerning what and how the professors teach? In my experience, professors of education use exactly the same ad hoc approach as high school teachers when determining curriculum content, teaching methods, or grading policies. When constructing a curriculum, professors generally do not consult their colleagues who are reputed to be experts on the theory of curriculum construction. When preparing for a self-study reaccreditation procedure, professors seem as unenthusiastic and untheoretical about examining their own work as high school teachers would be. Professors who advocate behavior modification or criterion-referenced instruction often fail to use these techniques in their own courses. Do professors make an effort to identify the topics that would be most important for teachers to study, or do they merely teach whatever interests them or their students? Do professors establish policies on departmental requirements of the basis of needs-assessments and philosophical arguments or on the basis of politics and economic expedience? Is theory consulted honestly to discover what should be done, or is it only trotted out to rationalize politically or economically ordained actions?

Perhaps the best recommendation I

can offer to professors of philosophy of education who want to increase the marketability and perceived relevance of their courses and publications is the following: examine your own courses, methods of teaching, administrative policies, and purposes (both stated and undisclosed); then begin constructing philosophical arguments about these things. Examine carefully what types of philosophizing about these things seem most interesting and most likely to influence what you do in practice. Observe what makes you approach or avoid this task. Then recognize that you must organize your course materials, teaching methods, and administrative policies in such a way that the teachers and administrators who are your students will be willing and able to do for themselves what you have been doing for yourself. Let your students see that you are examining your own activities and enlist their participation so that they learn by example to do self-examination.

Professors of introductory philosophy of education courses should establish their credibility and relevance at the start by mentioning large numbers of specific problems in practical morality faced by classroom teachers (a few were mentioned earlier), and beginning some philosophical argumentation about each of them. Students might then be asked to write their own arguments, or to state a tentative philosophy of education and use it to support some arguments. One or two issues could then be examined in depth so that students could discover what depth of argumentation is and how to achieve it. One or two overall philosophies of education (e.g., Plato,

Dewey) might be described, with constant indications of how those philosophies would approach the previously-discussed issues. Finally, students could once again be asked to state their overall philosophies of education and to use them to argue some specific issues. At some point in the course, the professor might offer philosophic arguments to support his or her own selection of content for the course, grading practices, and departmental policies.

I am opposed to the field-centered approach which insists that foundations courses be closely linked to continuing classroom observations or participations. Such a close linkage prevents the extended examination of individual events that is necessary to develop theoretical depth. Any college student has already had twelve years of classroom experience from which to draw examples.

I am also opposed to the neo-humanistic process approach which provides no predetermined content and which asks students to decide what they wish to study and to engage in interpersonal relations or self-discovery activities as the focus of the course. Such neo-humanistic foundations courses rarely discuss substantive philosophical arguments, and students leave the courses feeling cheated out of the intellectual growth one might expect from a college course, regardless of the affective insights they may have had (or pretended to have had). Somewhere in a teacher's education there must be help in learning to work with *ideas* about working with people rather than only working with people directly. That is, a theoretical component with some depth is needed. Philosophical,

social, and historical foundations of education would seem to be the place for such content in the teacher education program.

The purpose of this article is not to recommend a lessening of the intellectual content of foundations courses, but to recommend a strengthening of the explicitness with which the relevance to practice is established. If teachers cannot be made to feel a need for philosophical argumentation, there is no basis for including philosophy of education as a required course in the teacher education curriculum. Philosophy of education would then become an elective to be taken by prospective teachers for appreciation or enjoyment or by liberal arts students who have no intention of teaching. Such a course might be intellectually stimulating, but would probably attract only a few students.

Notes

1. Since September 1975 I have been a full time teacher of mathematics at a medium sized public suburban high school. For eight years before that I was assistant professor of philosophy of education at Oakland University and Emory University, and associate professor at Boston University. I have a Ph.D. in philosophy of education and have published about forty articles in scholarly journals.

2. Kenneth R. Conklin, "The Relevance Problem in Philosophy of Education" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana, 1967); summarized in *Educational Theory* 18 (Fall 1968): 356-64.

3. William K. Frankena, *Three Historical Philosophies of Education* (Chicago: Scott Foresman and Co., 1965). Frankena describes each philosophy and each one's position on the relevance between philosophic theory and educational practice.

4. For example, see Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944).

5. *Evaluative Criteria*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Study of Secondary School Evaluation, 1969).